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A librarian passed. Ainsworth Rand
Spofford, 1825-1908.

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A LIBRARIAN PASSED

AINSWORTH RAND SPOFFORD — 1825-1908*

[Born at Gilmanton, N. H., September 12th, 1825; died at Holderness, N. H., August 11th, 1908, in his eighty-third year of age and forty-eighth of government service. Prepared under private tutors and at Williston Seminary for the course at Amherst College, but prevented from this by threatened weakness of eyes and lungs. (An honorary LL.D. of Amherst in 1882.) Removing at nineteen to Cincinnati where he spent the succeeding fifteen years (1845-1860) as clerk in a bookstore, as bookseller and publisher, and (from 1859) as associate editor of the *Cincinnati Commercial*. Despatched by this to report the battle of Bull Run, he was, on his return through Washington, offered, and accepted, a position as first assistant in the Library of Congress. In 1864 appointed, by President Lincoln, librarian-in-chief. In 1897, on the removal of the library to the new building, resigning this to become chief assistant librarian, in which office he continued until his death.

(In 1861 the collections of the library numbered 63,000 items; in 1897, 1,006,055 items; in 1908, 1,534,346 books and pamphlets and (circa) 900,000 miscellaneous items. From 1870 it was also the Copyright Office. The entries for copyright from 1870 to 1897 numbered 1,200,000.)

One of the founders of the Literary Society of Cincinnati—an organization still flourishing. A member of the leading learned societies at Washington. Editor of voluminous reference books and compilations and a constant contributor to cyclopedias and reviews.

At his death, and for years preceding, the Dean of American Librarians.]

THIS number of *The Independent* is concerned particularly with the books of the day, and thus with the contemporary traits of which they are the reflection. It may be wholesome to contrast an expression of the past. Such an expression one may find in an ancient edifice, but also in books, and here and there personified in some individual, who remains to us as a relic of an earlier time, a memorial of different ways. It is of such a one that I offer these partial notes.

To those who visited the old Library of Congress at the Capitol (and during the latter half of the 19th century they numbered thousands) he will always be associated with it—a long, lean figure, in scrupulous frock, erect at a standing desk, and intent upon its littered burden, while the masses of material surged incoherently about him. From time to

time—an inquiry interrupting—a swift, decisive turn, an agile stride, a nervous burrow in some apparently futile heap, and a return triumphant, yet staidly triumphant, with the required volume. Then again absorption: in other volumes already subjugated, in auction catalogs, in copyright certificates, in correspondence (invariably autograph), in notes for editorial use, in the countless minutiae of insistent, direct, undelegated labor. A figure of absorption and of labor, consonant with the collections as they then existed; quaint indeed in mode and expression, yet efficient; immersed in the trivial, yet himself by no means trivial, imparting to it the dignity that comes of intense seriousness and complete sincerity. Grave in the task of infinite detail upon a mass of infinite dimension: grave, but never dour. Cheerful rather, even buoyant. Disdaining the frivolous as a waste of time; yet appreciating humor, and even responsive to accredited jest: although the response might concede no more than an "It pleases you to be facetious!" A lover of Nature, too, as booklovers often are: and pursuing her on occasions with deep breath and long stride. Granting himself, nevertheless, few vacations, and generally ignoring even the "annual leave" so scrupulously observed by most Government employees. Glorifying, rather, in the assiduity which his hardy, if attenuated, frame permitted: for the weakness of the lungs survived only in a mechanical cough, and the weakness of the eyes was remedied so completely that in his eighty-second year he resisted a prescription for glasses as premature and derogatory. A circulation free and abundant; the palate of a child; and a digestion unafraid.

Few knew him in all these phases or fully understood him in any; yet many saw him in the one hour of recreation that he allowed himself out of the twenty-four; on horseback, ambling through the streets of Washington or over neighboring roads—the tails of the still tenacious frock flapping behind him, untethered trousers rising toward the knee, an umbrella, if the sun beat hot, in his rein hand,

*By Herbert Putnam, Librarian of Congress. Reprinted from *The Independent*, Nov. 19, 1908.

and possibly an auction catalog in the other—unless, indeed, history (in his friend Bancroft) supplied him livelier companionship and converse.

I have said “ambled;” but this is not the word if it imply a slow jog, for his temperment, patience itself in matters of labor, became impatience itself in modes of motion. Especially did this show when during the heated spells he substituted a carryall for the saddle—urging the horse with whip and slapping rein in the one hand, the invariable catalog still in the other. No mere jog for him, but a smart trot, always verging on a canter, and without abatement for curve or corner. Then indeed would the passerby marvel, and the passenger (I write from experience) grip the seat and thank his stars that there is a special Providence for the confiding and reckless. Once a too narrow yet customary “shave” of a lamp-post ripped off the top of the carryall; but as a whole the temerity went unscathed.

The rides continued long after Dr. Bancroft had ceased to companion them, and, indeed, till after Dr. Spofford’s eightieth year. If they were discontinued then it was not from failing zest, but from impaired ability. For one day, while standing as usual at the center desk in the great rotunda, which now took the place of his narrow upright at the Capitol, intent as usual upon an accumulated mass before him, the sustaining muscles of his left side suddenly gave way, and he crumbled to the floor. He was lifted—laughing and expostulating—protesting also that it was “nothing”—yes, that he *would* go home, but would certainly “be back again in a day or two.” He was—in six weeks; but with his left arm fastened inert across his chest, and his left leg faltering.

But not his courage, nor his zeal, his enthusiasm, or his industry. The nervous vigor, before expressed in all his members, became now concentrated in his right hand. With this alone to take the instructions of his eager mind, he continued, though no longer erect or in public view, to pursue elusive titles through trade catalogs and bibliographies and trays of cards—managing even folios with dexterity and uncomplaining patience. An old man now for the first time; but resisting doughtily the inabilities as he resisted the in-

signia of old age; and ever, and until the last inability of all, the simple, arduous servant of his office and his duty.

His life was for the most part concentrated upon a single interest, yet it touched many men and women having varied interests. It was not, in comparison with some others, a life extensive in its own movement or experience. Its geographical compass was indeed very limited—a boyhood passed—as other boyhoods pass, in a small New England town, a brief period of youth in the chief city of New England, a few years of early manhood in a city of the Middle West, and the entire remainder at the national capital. It was deprived, through ill health, of the maturing influences and the invigorating associations afforded by a college career. It was not, on the other hand, in the ordinary sense a life of affairs. Its vocation, except for brief trials in business and in journalism, was a single one; the material of this not men, but books; its concern not achievement, but the record of achievement; its main purpose not to produce or to express, but to aid others in producing or expressing: for such is the vocation of the librarian.

But such a life is not thus merely intensive, still less is it narrow or merely local. A life among books is a life of manifold and matchless experiences—though they stop with yesterday. In a sense indeed it is not even geographically limited. “Ah, master, master,” says the ex-sailor host in “Joseph Andrews,” “if you had travelled as far as I have, and conversed with the many nations where I have traded!” “Master of mine,” retorts the parson, “perhaps I have travelled a great deal farther than you without the assistance of a ship. Do you imagine sailing by different cities or countries is travelling? ‘Cælum non animum mutant qui trans mare currunt.’ I can go farther in an afternoon than you in a twelvemonth. What, I suppose *you* have seen the Pillars of Hercules, and perhaps the walls of Carthage. Nay, you have heard Scylla and seen Charybdis. You have entered the closet where Archimedes was found at the taking of Syracuse. I suppose *you* have sailed among the Cyclades, and passed the famous straits which take their name from the unfortunate Helle; you have passed the very spot, I conceive, where Dædalus fell

into that sea; you have traversed the Euxine I make no doubt—nay, you may have been on the banks of the Caspian, and called at Colchis to see if there is ever another Golden fleece.' . . .

"Not I truly, master," answers the host; "I never touched at any of these places."

"But *I* have been at all these," pursues Adams. . . . "Nay, since thou art so dull to misunderstand me still. I will inform thee the travelling I mean is in books, the only way of travelling by which any knowledge is to be acquired."

So Dr. Spofford, persistent resident of Washington, visiting Europe only once and for a brief few weeks until after his seventy-fifth year, was day by day throughout his career a busy and ardent traveller in every quarter of the globe, as he was also an enthusiastic comrade of the choice spirits of all time. On occasions, as in his "Book for All Readers," he would describe these travels and these majestic intimacies in terms which in another would have seemed pompous, but in him represented an actual and experienced exultation. To him the book was the thing; Homer, Dante, Milton and Shakespeare active associates; the past of infinite interest, the dicta of the poets and sages enduringly fresh. (That to him they could never be trite, the walls and ceilings of this building bear ample witness.)

As a journalist he must of course have had to deal with the motives and movements of his time. And the pamphlet, remarkable for his years, which in 1851 he put forth in appeal to the Higher Law against a law of Congress, is evidence of not merely a vigorous but a fiery interest in a burning question of the moment, as it is also of that rotund style, from which he never lapsed even in correspondence. But with his entrance upon librarianship he put away the merely contemporary, and from that moment no one could find him partisan upon a current issue, nor, except after insistent effort, could discover his opinion upon it.

His indifference to such would have sufficiently accounted for that abstraction of manner which became characteristic, and was so often misconstrued—except that he has himself furnished us a different explanation. It was his recipe against bores. He writes:

"The bore is commonly one who, having little

or nothing to do, inflicts himself upon the busy persons of his acquaintance, and especially upon the ones whom he credits with knowing the most—to wit, the librarians. Receive him courteously, but keep on steadily at the work you are doing when he enters. If you are skilful you can easily do two things at once; for example, answer your idler friend or your bore, and revise title cards, or mark a catalog, or collate a book, or look up a question, or write a letter, at the same time. Never lose your good humor, never say that your time is valuable, or that you are very busy; never hint at his going away, but never quit your work; answer questions cheerfully, and keep on, allowing nothing to take your eyes off your business. By and by he will take the hint, if not wholly pachydermatous, and go away of his own accord. By pursuing this course I have saved infinite time, and got rid of infinite bores, by one and the same process."

According to his own testimony his abstraction of manner was thus on occasion a deliberate and cultivated one. But its habitual cause was absorption elsewhere. As the years advanced this absorption grew. In his latter days it seemed at times to draw him completely from us, while sitting in our midst. We could more than forgive him; he was in better company!

A soul aloof, in a world ideal—the world of books. To him it was only

"the thoughts and the facts that are garnered up in books [that] are endowed with a life that is perennial. Men may die, and legislators may perish, and librarians are mortal; but libraries and literature are immortal. Even though the ever-gnawing tooth of time should one day undermine this beautiful structure, and its granite walls should crumble to decay—yet through the ever-living power of the magic art of printing books will survive, and the thoughts of the mind will far outlast towers of granite, and monuments of marble."

So, in a latter year, he spoke at Concord. And what he felt of the structure and its contents there he lived here. The physique about him was of small concern—the mere apparatus of life, even contemptible. *Why* apparatus, when the contact could be immediate? *Why system*, when the motive was pure? Hence his complacency—quite incorrigible—in disorder about him; a complacency as delightful to me personally as it was, at times, perplexing officially. He had, in fact, an order always in view; but it was an ultimate and ideal order, not a present and adjacent one. The things about him were merely things—external, temporal; he was engaged with the truths and beauties that are inner and eternal.

In matters of mere business, indifference to conventional order entails disaster; and it did with him. But never to a doubt of his unselfishness, of his honesty of purpose, or of his profound personal integrity.

His own contributions to literature, apart from reviews and the "Book for All Readers" (1904), were chiefly compilations: The "American Almanac" during a series of years (1878-89); "A Manual of Parliamentary Rules" (1884); the "Library of Choice Literature," 10 volumes (1881-88); the "Library of Wit and Humor," five volumes (1884); the "Library of Historic Characters and Famous Events," 10 volumes (1894-1905); these latter, subscription books of the type with which our country has been flooded during the past quarter century, and not necessarily to its disadvantage, in spite of the contempt in which they are held by the connoisseur, who disdains literature in fragments, though approving "bits" of nature, and of art, and of human society, when the whole is beyond's one's reach. But as a member of three societies in Washington—the Literary, the Historical and the Anthropological—Dr. Spofford was a contributor of historical, of descriptive and of critical papers, which were always notable for their fullness of detail, their vigor, and their admirably measured, if somewhat formal, style. No one can remember him dull on such occasions, nor could any utterance of his be trite which came from a personality so convincing. One of his latest such contributions was to the Historical Society, in his last and crippled year. And no member of the Literary will forget the latest of all, at a meeting only a few months before his death, when, with eloquent indignation and a wealth of resource, he delivered Shakespeare from the depreciations of Tolstoi.

His literary taste, if conventional, was exact in its perspective. When, however, the matter was not of a choice of literature, but of books, he became the antiquarian. Not the future, but the past of a book interested him. And the values of the past were equal. He had indeed a dominant ambition for the library—to see it rich in "Americana." He could not bear the thought that precious original imprints should be lacking in it, though found in the Lenox or the Carter Brown. It was no consolation to him that we had the

text itself in some other form, even in *facsimile*; and he was obviously anguished when we decided against the expenditure for some such imprint, because we had to decide in favor of some text in itself indispensable to research. Yet his enthusiasm would seem just as keen for some item of an interest purely particular and in no sense bibliographic, but (as his ardent blue pencil would proclaim against it) "long sought."

If, however, his sense of values seemed to lack proportion, it was explicable in as it was cultivated by the method which for nearly forty years he had followed in the development of the collections. There are two methods practicable: one is by systematic selection in accordance with a scheme of organic development; the other is by the immediate acquisition of any proffered items within the general field. The former ensures a collection at each stage symmetrical. The latter does not; which is not to say that it may not result in such a collection, if pursued far enough.

Under certain conditions it may seem the only method. It seemed so in the old library during the period when, with an unlimited field, it had but meager purchasing funds. Then the only course seemed to be to buy here and there, chiefly from auction catalogs, individual items as such. Had the other method—that of systematic selection—been followed, the collection would doubtless at the time of its transfer have been more nearly organic, but it would have missed for years and perhaps permanently many an item of extraordinary interest, which the course pursued secured to it—through Dr. Spofford's prodigious industry in scanning catalogs and unwilling frugality with which he shaped his bids; this very frugality, by eluding the vigilance of competitors, often proving the finest craft and the salvation of the item.

The subjective effect of this method is the habit of regarding *any* lacking item offered as of the most urgent importance. Its relation to the subject matter, or to any theoretic scheme, is lost sight of in its relation to the market. It becomes an "*occasion*," to be coveted and seized for its own sake.

The enlarged duties and resources of the library have brought to us different and perhaps more scientific criteria of selection. If,

however, in contrast to these, Dr. Spofford's habitual ones seemed somewhat whimsical in their emphasis, I always called halt to any disrespect by the reflection that it was precisely such that had formed great and efficient collections all over the world; and had indeed brought into the Library of Congress itself material of a value incredible in proportion to the outlay; by the observation also that many an item in such a collection, at its acquisition apparently trivial, and for long years dormant, is by some unexpected occasion awakened to sudden life and utility.

The press notices concerning him have uniformly dwelt upon the marvels of his memory. In reading them one might be reading the record of a Magliabecchi. It was indeed, of all librarians, Magliabecchi whom, in this respect and some others, he perhaps most nearly resembled, except that he would not, I think, have been willing to claim the learning that tradition ascribes to the famous Italian. It was the books that he knew; not, except in certain fields, the subject matters. He was not, for instance, a classical scholar nor a thorough linguist. He had not, on the other hand, special knowledge of nor interest in any branch of science or the arts. He was indeed reader rather than scholar. But he was a notable proof of what may be accomplished by the mere reader, intent, absorbed, with a definite purpose and an indefinite capacity. Genius may, as claimed, be the habit of infinite pains; with him, in reading, it was the habit of absolute attention. The memory of the thing read followed as of course. So he himself explained it.

The extent and precision of his own were unexampled among American librarians. They were impressive, brilliant. Combining with the wonderfully responsive agility of his mind, the service that they enabled him to render during the half century when, but for them, the library was a chaos, was an indispensable service which gave life to the collections and ensured their future. It is doubtless by it that the public will chiefly remember him.

It was due to it, also, combined with his indomitable industry and his equally indomitable optimism, that the collections signified what they did when they were moved over from the Capitol. For only those qualities

could have enabled him, without complete catalogs, without proper bibliographic apparatus, with an inadequate staff and a but trivial purchasing fund (which never exceeded \$10,000 a year): only those qualities, I say, could have enabled him to gather into the collections the mass of invaluable material which they then represented.

But to us, his associates, it was not his memory, but certain traits, which signified; the former was a phenomenon of curious interest, the latter were qualities personally affecting. I need only name them: his ardor, his devotion, his patience, his steady fortitude, his essential sweetness, his fundamental simplicity. The severe trial of these in his latter years left them undiminished. They continued even through the closing months, when activity must have meant effort, and effort, pain. Never once within my remembrance did he utter an expression that rendered our recent tasks more difficult, although the purpose of these must have been to him in many respects indifferent, and although they necessarily involved some temporary neglect of considerations as to the development of the collections which he held sacred.

To give over to another the accustomed reins of authority is at no time easy; to give them over at the moment when the institution is emerging from a pinched and narrow to a spacious and glorious life; from the life which has been a struggle to the opportunities for which one has struggled: to give them over then, and with them the prestige and the privilege of the office; such a surrender is hard indeed. The man who, like Dr. Spofford, can make it without a murmur, before or after, is of incredible rarity. The man of his years who, having for two generations been chief executive, cannot merely subordinate, but endear himself to his successor, and never waver in fidelity to the institution nor in enthusiasm for its interests—such a man has achieved a feat beside which mere feats of memory are of trivial moment.

With him, however, this was not a feat, but nature; the ordinary expression of a nature absolutely loyal, consistently unselfish, enduringly childlike. It will be a sad day for any profession when such a nature is referred to as merely "quaint," as if an anachronism.

Particularly will it be a sad day for our profession, with its present stress upon system and mechanism. The age, indeed — our calculating age — requires these: the masses of material to be dealt with, the number and variety of needs to be met, the demand that they be met with promptness and precision. System and mechanism are now necessary auxiliaries; but they cannot be substitutes. And I, associated with them, under duty to promote them, shall not cease to be grateful for the nine years which have given me near contact with one who signified so much and so deeply without regard to them. To me, indeed, Ainsworth Spofford was more than an individual; he was an institution. And with him the continuity has been broken, an order has past, for which no "new order," however efficient, can compensate.

His 36 years in the old library were an incessant and arduous struggle of lofty aims against adverse conditions. One may rejoice that the final decade brought to these aims at least, if not to himself personally, just fruit-

tion; the building which he had appealed, argued and prayed for, completed in amplitude and magnificence even beyond his dreams, provision ensured for the development of the collections in accordance with the theory upon which he had ever insisted — that the library was not a merely legislative library, but the National Library of the United States — and himself, if no longer in chief control, at least free to devote himself to the increment of them which had been his pride and his passion. That last decade was, I think, to him a period of cheerful contentment, as it was a period of still useful and active service. And if its close involved any struggle, it was a struggle with inabilities merely physical. In the "Ars Moriendi" the dying man is harassed by five temptations: "Unbelief, despair, impatience under suffering, vain-glory, avarice." Fashion the *converse* of these and you have the spirits which, not as assailants, but as sustaining attendants, ensured serenity to Dr. Spofford's closing days as they had buoyancy to his entire life.

A. R. S.

1825-1908

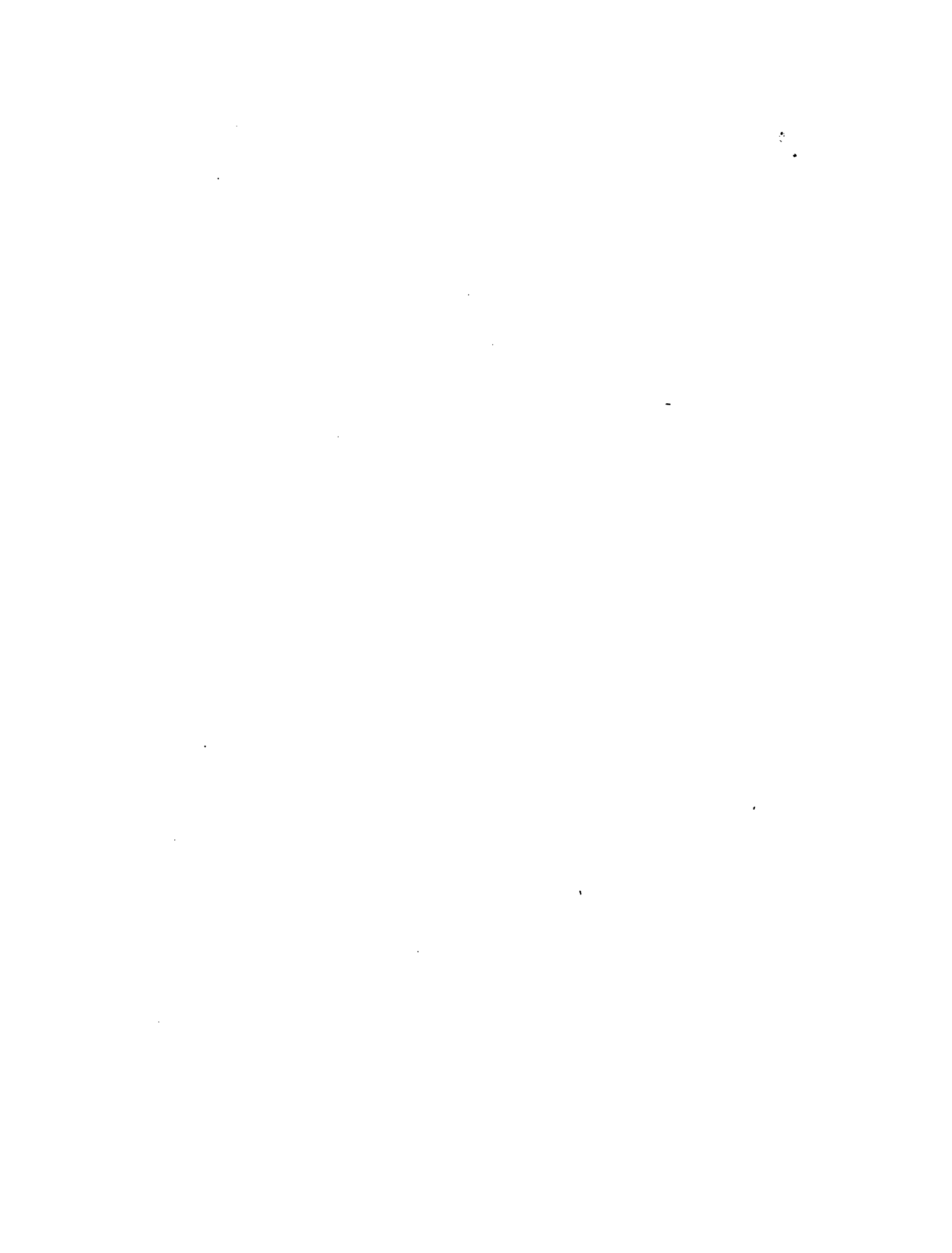
The Epilogue

He Toiled long, well, and with Good Cheer
 In the Service of Others
 Giving his Whole, Asking little
 Enduring patiently, Complaining
 Not at all
 With small Means
 Effecting Much
 * *

He had no Strength that was not Useful
 No Weakness that was not Lovable
 No Aim that was not Worthy
 No Motive that was not Pure
 * * *

Ever he Bent
 His Eye upon the Task
 Undone
 Ever he Bent
 His Soul upon the Stars
 His Heart upon
 The Sun
 * *

Bravely he Met
 His Test
 Richly he Earned
 His Rest





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